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## **Enrolling in Higher Education: The Perceptions of Stakeholders**

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### **Abstract**

There is a substantial body of research on student satisfaction, retention and student engagement in higher education; however, there is limited research on student image or perception of a university and factors contributing towards choosing a particular university. In the current, highly competitive environment universities are seeking to identify exactly what differentiates them from other institutions. In particular, it is important to understand what attracts prospective students to one university rather than another, and to ensure that these expectations are met once they enrol. Failure to meet student expectations may result in student withdrawal, which limits students' chances to participate in higher education. Fierce competition between universities and private higher education facilities provides opportunity for students to enrol in institutions better able to listen to student voices and able cater for students' needs.

Students' image or perception of a university and reasons for choosing to study in a particular university could be based on various characteristics and attributes of the university. Such image or perception may differ based on the diverse student groups such as recent school leavers, mature age adults and international students.

This article is based on a study conducted in a large Australian university and outlines the key findings that include: key factors influencing student choice to study with a university, student perception of the first preferred institution compared with their perception of four other Australian metropolitan universities.

**Keywords:** Student image, perceptions and factors influencing choice

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In essence, institutional image can be articulated as the overall impression of the public about the organisation (Barich & Kotler, 1991). Though there are a number of studies on student perceptions of the learning and teaching environment, for example student responsibilities of student learning (e.g., Devlin, 2002), student identity style inventory (Boyd

et al., 2003), learning environment in science classes (e.g., Nair & Fisher, 2001), there is a paucity of studies in Australian context that specifically look at the image of a university and factors contributing towards choosing a particular university from the perspective of the student. In an earlier study, Terkla and Pagano (1993) assessed the image of a university using a set of over 25 indicators. These indicators measured the overall image and compared them to the desired image that had been articulated by faculty. The outcome of the study showed some parallels to the desired image but differences were explained in terms of ‘the desired image tends toward extremes’ (p. 14).

The importance of institutional image has been clearly enunciated in the work of LeBlanc and Nguyen (1999). In this study they illustrate that there are two pivotal components that drive customer perceptions of institutional reputation and image, mainly functional and emotional. The *functional* component relates to tangible characteristics that can be easily measured. By contrast, the *emotional* component is associated with psychological dimensions that are connected with feelings and attitudes towards the institution. LeBlanc and Nguyen’s (1999) work proposed that the interaction between institutional image and reputation contributes to a better understanding of customer loyalty. In other words, if the perceptions of institutional reputation and image are positive, the degree of customer loyalty tends to be higher.

The study of factors influencing student choice to study in an institution is important for a number of reasons. Firstly, it gives the institution an understanding of the reasons why students choose a particular institution over others. Secondly, the information obtained can and should be used by universities to assist in the development of their marketing plans. The knowledge on student image and perception of a university can also help institutions to understand student expectations and strategies that could be implemented to improve student experience. In addition, it gives empirical evidence to the institutions to strive for change. For example, Agronow and Hengstler’s (1995) study at the University of California, Santa Barbara (UCSB) identified problems with top students rejecting UCSB because of its academic reputation.

There is a limited research study on factors influencing student choice. The studies undertaken to date has been mostly conducted overseas. Chapman (1981) suggests three factors influencing student choice: information obtained from friends, parent and high school staff; institutional characteristics such as cost and location; and finally, institutional effort to communicate with students. Two stage studies by Joseph and Joseph (1998) with 300 students found service quality and value of education and degree are the most important factors. Similar findings were also found in a study undertaken in Scotland with accounting and engineering students. The study, undertaken by Briggs (2006), suggested that academic reputation and distance from home and location were key factors in student choice. Studies undertaken by Coccari and Javalgi (1995) in the United States suggest that quality of teachers, academic reputation and cost were seen as the top three highly ranked items influencing students in choosing to study. Research on factors influencing student choice to study in higher education has so far shown that the most important factor includes characteristics related to quality of the institution, quality of teachers or quality of academic programs and infrastructure. Studies undertaken with both students and parents by Broekemier and Seshadri (1999) show that the quality of program of study, campus safety, cost and academic reputation as the top key criteria used by students and parents to choose institutions.

In striving to be successful, every institution is concerned with portraying itself in a positive way. More specifically, university image or branding is becoming increasingly important in the higher education market. With this emphasis, and the increasing competitiveness in the higher education sector, it is not only logical but a necessity to evaluate this perception through the eyes of institutions' main client, the students. This article looks at this interesting and challenging issue through the eyes of the students. In particular, the article looks at factors that contribute to student choice to enrol at a particular Australian university.

### Methodology

A survey was conducted with 4,300 new students enrolled in undergraduate programs. The survey consisted of a series of items measuring university characteristics that influenced their decision to apply for university studies. The design of the questionnaire also allowed participants to justify their ratings. Respondents were asked to rate the importance (1–*low* to 5–*high*) on a range of university characteristics that influenced their decision to apply to the university compared with other universities in the same market.

Both paper and online methodology was used to gather student feedback. The response rate was about 40%. The response sample was representative to the profile of the university in demographics (e.g., gender, age and domestics or international students).

### Results and Discussion

Table 1 reports on the various characteristics measured in the survey. The results show that the top five reasons influencing student selection of a particular university were quality of teaching staff, academic facilities, employment prospects, links with industry and the professions, and location of the university. The survey was first conducted in 2004 and repeated in 2008. The results presented in Table 1 show very slight variation of findings over the 4-year period.

**Table 1**

*Factors influencing selection of the university*

Characteristics	Importance 2008		Importance 2004	
	Rank	Mean	Rank	Mean
Quality of Teaching Staff	1	4.7	1	4.6
Academic Facilities	2	4.4	3	4.4
Employment Prospects	3	4.3	2	4.4
Links with Industry/Professions	3	4.3	4	4.3
Location of University	3	4.3	5	4.2
Flexible Study Mode	6	4.1	7	4.1
Wide Choice of Subjects	7	4.0	6	4.0
Academic Reputation	8	3.9	8	4.0
Ease of Entry	9	3.8	9	3.8
Cost of the Course	9	3.8	10	3.7
High University Admission Index (UAI) Cut Offs	11	2.6	11	2.9
International Study Opportunities	12	2.4	12	2.8

A further approach in this survey was that students were asked to rate the extent to which a set of image characteristics were associated with each of the metropolitan universities operating in the same market. The results, as shown in Tables 2 and 3, consistently show that there are different student images between post-87 (universities established after 1987),

Group of Eight (Go8) and Australian Technology Network (ATN) universities. The top five image students' rated on a Go8 university include: the rigour of academic, prestigious, elite, traditional and theoretical. Student image of a post-87 university vary somewhat different from Go8. The top five images include: friendly, flexible, practical, progressive and fun. Interestingly, student image of an ATN university shows similar image as Go8, with one image seen as distinctive from other Sydney metropolitan universities, this being workplace-focused. Table 2 briefly compares the top five student image by each group of university.

**Table 2**

*Top Five Student Image 2008*

Post-87	Go8	ATN
Friendly	Academically rigorous	Academically rigorous
Flexible	Prestigious	Prestigious
Practical	Elite	Work-place focused
Progressive	Traditional	Practical
Fun	Theoretical	Elite

Post-87 = University started after 1987, G08 = Eight old sandstone and research intensive universities, ATN = Australian Technology Network of universities

**Table 3**

*Perceptions of Students with Four Metropolitan Universities 2008 and 2004*

Image Characteristics	Post-87 2008	Post-87 2004	Go8 (1) 2008	Go8 (1) 2004	ATN 2008	ATN 2004	Go8 (2) 2008	Go8 (2) 2004
Friendly	64.6%	61%	22.4%	19%	32.0%	22%	35.2%	22%
Flexible	51.7%	56%	15.2%	14%	23.8%	23%	19.7%	20%
Practical	50.8%	50%	23.2%	18%	48.4%	34%	40.8%	22%
Progressive	39.7%	39%	32.8%	20%	32.0%	26%	32.4%	24%
Fun	34.0%	35%	16.0%	14%	26.2%	20%	39.4%	17%
Relevant	31.5%	34%	28.8%	16%	31.1%	20%	21.1%	15%
Work-place focused	24.6%	30%	26.4%	21%	54.1%	41%	38.0%	26%
Academically rigorous	24.1%	16%	84.0%	53%	68.0%	49%	87.3%	53%
Theoretical	18.0%	13%	45.6%	33%	32.8%	30%	38.0%	29%
Egalitarian	8.3%	6%	12.0%	7%	8.2%	4%	4.2%	5%
Prestigious	7.2%	8%	83.2%	70%	59.8%	53%	71.8%	61%
Traditional	6.7%	7%	58.4%	48%	25.4%	20%	39.4%	32%
Elite	2.2%	3%	59.2%	46%	41.8%	33%	45.1%	35%

The survey results suggest that the top five most important reasons that influence student choice is quality of teaching staff, quality of academic facilities, employment prospects, links with industry and professions and location of the university. Review of the open-ended comments written by respondents in relation to quality of teaching shows the following recurring themes: teachers with excellent subject knowledge, teachers with industry experience; teachers who engage students in learning; good communication skills; responsive, committed and accessible teachers. In line with this importance, the second important factor relating to student choice related to academic facilities. Respondents also wrote extensive comments in relation to this factor. The recurring comments suggest the student expectation was for an effective and responsive administrative support system to support student learning, such as library, information technology, student administration and

other support services — including sports facilities. These factors are imperative for a successful study program at universities.

The finding of this study on factors influencing student choice to study in a large Australian university clearly shows that students are well informed about university characteristics and their image. Secondly, this study, along with the review of literature, also shows that student choice is based on the quality characteristics such as quality of teachers, quality of academic facilities and the outcome of university education (i.e., recognition of graduates by employers). The dominance of higher education league tables and ranking may play a key role in student selection and choice. The United Kingdom experience suggests that the use of league or ranking tables in newspapers and other media has resulted in 30% increase in student applications in top ranking universities in 2001 (Gunn & Hill, 2008). According to Clarke (2007), ranking and league tables have played a significant factor in student choice, particularly with high achieving students. A study in the UK with employer groups suggests that employers cited a range of sources of information on quality and standards in higher education including: personal experience (of past graduates), professional perceptions and network, league tables and regional links (Morley & Aynsley, 2007). According to Marginson (2004) and Morley (2003), quality scores play a central role in the marketisation of higher education and become prestige maximisers. Such information is used by students (where to study), by employers (where to find high quality graduates) and industry (where to invest in research). The availability of such information in the public domain influences student choice in domestic and international student markets.

### **Conclusion**

The survey of student image and perception allows universities to know about student expectations of both domestic and international students. Such data plays a key role in knowing new student expectations before enrolment that may help universities to both engage and retain students, particularly in the first year, by accommodating their needs. It would help universities to clearly outline expectations management in student orientations so that students are aware of the various services and support provided by the university. Further, the results can and must be used in the formulation of a strategic marketing plan as well as assisting faculties in developing their individual marketing plans. In addition, such information will aid faculties in relating to students' expectations of university in developing their course proposals

Trend data on factors influencing student choice, such as quality of teaching, also allows universities to undertake comparative analysis between what students expect and the actual student experience by using a range of surveys and feedback mechanisms and, in turn, improve the various areas.

The challenge for universities in the changing higher education landscape is to listen to student voices and manage student expectations in a timely manner. Students will continue to seek increased information to reach more informed decisions and publicly available information on university performance is essential. The current pattern of student participation in higher education with a large proportion of students engaged in full-time or part-time employment informs policymakers that students increasingly expect universities to fit around their lives, rather than students adjusting their lives for tertiary education. Universities' inability to meet the needs and expectations of students will result in dissatisfaction, and it may also have a negative impact on progression, success or contribute to possible drop-out of students. Such negative impact will have consequences on public

funding of universities that is driven by performance metrics in many developed countries with student satisfaction, retention, progression and completions as key indicators.

The results of the national course experience questionnaire (CEQ) in Australia shows low student satisfaction on items related to good teaching, which prospective and current students see as most important when choosing to study with a university. Australia performs well below UK universities on similar scales.

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